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‘THE HUMANITARIAN AID SITUATION IN NAGORNO KARARBAKH’

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UPDATED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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We met many of the deportees, crossed the border into Azerbaijan to hear the Azeri version of events and concluded that Azerbaijan was indeed undertaking a systematic policy of deportation of Armenians from this historically Armenian territory.

Escalation of Political Threats to annihilate Karabakh's semi-autonomous status.

Later in 1991, Azerbaijan announced its intention to abolish the semi-autonomous status of Karabakh as an 'oblast' and to rename its capital city, Stepanakert, with a Turkish name. The Armenian population in Karabakh saw this as the beginning of the end for them and used the powers available to them under the Soviet Constitution to call for a referendum with a view to self-determination of their future political status.

Escalation of Military Offensives against Karabakh.

Azerbaijan responded by declaring its intention to pursue a 'military solution' to the 'Karabakh problem'. Full-scale war broke out at the turn of the year and by January 1992 the enclave was under massive military offensives. Blockaded, bombarded and besieged, the Armenians living there decided to resist, despite apparently impossible odds. . On my return in January 1992, I found a deeply disturbing situation: 150,000 Armenians trying to defend this small territory (about 100 miles north-south and 50 miles at the narrowest section east-west) with only hunting rifles to resist attacks on their villages by Azeri troops, well-armed with tanks, sophisticated weapons and helicopter gunships.

Later that winter, I counted 400 Grad missiles every day pounding into Stepanakert and surrounding villages from the Azeri-held dominating heights of Shushi above Stepanakert.

The development of that war has been recorded in 'Ethnic Cleansing in Progress: War in Nagorno Karabakh' ¹.

2. The Aftermath of War.

A cease-fire was eventually agreed in 1994, which has held, precariously. However, the aftermath is a devastated infrastructure: during the war, about 150 villages and towns were destroyed; more than 11,000 homes and 226 multi-storey residential buildings – representing 60% of all housing in Karabakh – were completely or partially ruined; the

¹ 'Ethnic Cleansing in Progress: War in Nagorno Karabakh', Caroline Cox and John Eibner, updated 1999, available from HART.

health care system nearly collapsed with serious damage or destruction of hospitals, 17 clinics and 70 primary health care/first aid stations; 200 educational institutions (schools, colleges and the university in Stepanakert) as well as 121 theatres, museums and cultural centres; and over 500 economic or social centres.

3. Humanitarian Assistance.

During the war, the priority for humanitarian aid was the supply of life-saving resources essential for survival – predominantly medicines, but also, at the height of the conflict, when 40% of Karabakh was overrun by Azeri forces and over 80,000 civilians fled to Stepanakert, rations fell below even the prevailing minimum of 35gm of flour per person a day and _ of a kg of sugar per month. During that crisis food became a priority.

Since the ceasefire, the Karabakh people have worked very hard to use their own limited resources and the aid made available to them by international agencies, to maximum effect. However, life is still very harsh for many people, especially those who have had to flee, often, more than once, from their homes in Azerbaijan or areas in Shaumyan and Karabakh now occupied by Azeris.

4. The problems of Displaced People, both Armenian and Azeri.

Many thousands of Azeris as well as Armenians are suffering the tragedy and displacement and living in continuing hardship. Visitors to Azerbaijan are taken to see the wretched conditions in which many displaced Azeris are still kept.

Why is it that Armenia, with a population of only 3 million (or less, which has suffered not only from the war, but also from one of the most devastating earthquakes in modern times, and is still enduring a blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan, has managed to find some accommodation for all its displaced people, while Azerbaijan, with a population of 7 million, no earthquake or blockade, and massive oil revenues, plus UNHCR help, still keeps many of its broadly comparable number of displaced people in the horrible and dehumanizing conditions of the camps?

The question of returnees and population movement is particularly sensitive, as one of Azerbaijan's policies in recent years before the war had been to try to achieve a fundamental demographic colonization of Karabakh, with a massive influx of Azeris, changing the population of Karabakh through inward migration. The policy of forced deportations of Armenians from their villages and the replacement of the Armenian

villagers by Azeris was an escalation of a process which had been ongoing for a considerable time. Clearly, the prospect of repetition of a renewed policy of demographic takeover is a major concern for the Armenians who live in Karabakh - and whose presence there over the centuries is literally written in tablets of stone in historic churches and artifacts going back to the 4th century.

5. The recent destruction by Azerbaijan of priceless Armenian churches, holy crosses and tombstones in Nakhichevan.

This wanton, barbaric destruction of hundreds of Armenian historic, beautiful stone monuments and dozens of churches represents not only a loss of process cultural heritage for Armenia – but for the world.² It also indicates the probability of similar atrocities in Nagorno Karabakh should Azerbaijan gain control there. I remember when the Armenians lived in Nakhichevan and I was present during the last stages of their forcible expulsion from their ancient Armenian territory. Being able to testify to Azerbaijan's policy there, I strongly support the Armenian's concerns over the return of Azeris to Karabakh and the probability that this would be the beginning of the process of ethnic transformation of that enclave from Armenian to Azeri control and a recurrence of the tragedy which has occurred in Nakhichevan.

Azerbaijan's Spurious Counter-Claims.

Azerbaijan has since been alleging that Armenians have been carrying out destruction of Azeri cultural sites in Karabakh. A map has been printed showing locations where fires have occurred, purportedly destroying historic Azeri monuments.

However, at the end of a dry, hot summer, bush fires regularly ignite spontaneously and there are no sites of cultural or historic significance which have been affected by fire in Karabakh. An independent investigating team has concluded that the fires which have occurred are merely spontaneous 'natural' events and no damage has been done to Azeri artefacts; they also point out that similar fires have ignited across the border where there are no Armenians.

Thus the Azeri allegations appear to be a distraction designed to divert attention from their destruction of the Armenian historic heritage in Nakhichevan, which has been widely reported. Moreover, when independent investigators have tried to visit these

² See House of Lords Hansard of Parliamentary proceedings, First Question, July 20, 2006.

locations in Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan has refused access, raising the question: if there is nothing to hide, why should visits be prohibited?

6. The Refusal of the United Nations Relief Organisations to help in Karabakh.

UN relief organizations such as UNHCR and UNICEF could provide a very valuable contribution to humanitarian assistance much needed by thousands of people living in Karabakh, many of whom have been forced off their lands several times by Azeri aggression.

For example, many survivors of the massacres by Azeris of Armenians in Baku and Sumgait in the late 1980s fled to Shaumyan region to the north of Karabakh. When this was overrun by Azeris in the war, they had to flee again, to Stepanakert, which was already devastated by bombardment. The local Armenians have found some form of accommodation for them, but conditions are still very difficult.

Whereas the UN organizations helped Azeris who had fled from the fighting in the war, and were very vocal advocates on their behalf, they were silent about the plight of the Armenian refugees – because they were not present to witness their suffering.

Thus the UN has adopted an asymmetrical policy, in favour of Azerbaijan, both with regard to aid and advocacy.

I would urge the UN to reconsider its policy of refusal to help the people of Karabakh in these very difficult post-conflict situations. I understand there are precedents for working in places with disputed political status – so why do key UN organisations such as UNHCR and UNICEF not help the people in great need of their help in Karabakh?

7. The Current Political Situation.

As the focus of the Hearing is humanitarian aid, I will not dwell at length on the political issues, as they demand a Hearing in their own right.

During a recent visit (July 23 to August 3) we were able to meet with the Foreign Minister of Armenia as well as with the President and Foreign Minister of Nagorno Karabakh.

Issues discussed included:

- Azerbaijan is not ready to make any compromise but is, sadly, maintaining a very aggressive position, with threats of renewed military offensives.
- Azerbaijan is only requiring concessions from Armenia and Karabakh, with no indication of willingness to discuss reciprocal concessions.

- The people of Karabakh cannot afford to accept Azeri sovereignty because, before the conflict, they were being subjected to 'white genocide' and a policy of extinction by demographic domination and deportation; they also believe that Azerbaijan would subject them to the same fate as the Armenians of Nakhichevan, where, although they represented 60-70% of the population, but were driven into extinction.
- Armenians are willing to discuss possible ways forward, including the return of displaced Azeris to their lands in certain areas such as the towns to the east of Karabakh
- Consideration might be given to a possibility of a further reinstatement of Azeris within Karabakh to a maximum of 15% of the population consistent with the latest Census in 1989. This would be part of a process of negotiation, which would include agreement on a Referendum for the population of Karabakh to decide on self-determination.
- However, as Azerbaijan seems currently to be determined to refuse to discuss a political solution but only to demand concessions by Armenians, there is a stalemate in negotiations and the Armenians of Karabakh claim it is essential for them to retain a strong Army and capability to defend themselves robustly in the event of any further Azeri offensives.
- The Armenians of Karabakh also claim that any successful political solution will depend on their participation in talks about the future of Karabakh, arguing that it is essential that they are part of any discussions on their own future.

8. The Socio-Economic Situation in Karabakh.

- During the war, 50% of Karabakh was occupied by Azeris and the remaining 50% subjected to sustained bombardment from aerial and ground offensives. Therefore, after the cease-fire began in 1994, conditions were very difficult and it was necessary to rebuild the shattered infrastructure (see section 1 above).
- Great progress has been made: Stepanakert, in which almost every building had been destroyed or damaged, has been almost completely rebuilt. Efforts are now focused on other towns and villages.

- Investment is encouraged by a 'very mild' tax system, with favourable conditions which have brought in \$50 million inward investment over the past 5 years, from France, Ukraine, USA, Russia, Italy and other European countries.
- Thousands of new jobs have been created and now the general standard of living in Karabakh is no lower than in many post-Soviet regions.
- Much of the devastated infrastructure has been, or is being, restored, with reconstruction of roads, schools and hospitals.
- Primary foci of development now include energy sources, agriculture and mining, especially in Mardakert region (one of the hardest hit during the war), where in the past 2 years, 1,000 jobs have been created.
- There are now several very good hotels, especially in Stepanakert, Shushi, Vank and one on the road from Stepanakert to Vank.
- Tourism will be encouraged; already the number of tourists has been increasing steadily. New initiatives will encourage new forms of tourism, such as 'adventure tourism' with opportunities to enjoy Karabakh's beautiful mountainous country through the development of facilities for hiking and climbing.

9. The Development of Democracy and Civil Society.

The Karabakh leadership see the progress made in the development of democratic institutions and due process as vital to international respect for their ability to develop as an independent political entity. They therefore take justifiable pride in the favourable reports by independent observers of 'free and fair' presidential and parliamentary elections.

They believe that the progress being made in the economic development of their land and the regeneration of social, educational and health care institutions, demonstrate their ability to develop as a robust democracy. Their investment in the cultural life of Karabakh, with music, dance, art and theatre reflects the commitment of the Armenian people to the preservation of their historic culture.

And their commitment to the restoration of churches which had been destroyed or damaged during the Soviet era and the subsequent war with Azerbaijan, together the building of 2 new churches in Stepanakert (not allowed during Soviet and Azeri rule) is a

demonstration of their commitment to maintain and preserve their spiritual heritage. Armenia was the first nation to become a Christian nation as early as 301AD - and one of Armenia's oldest churches and monasteries is located at Amaras, in Karabakh, where there is a tombstone with the date 340AD still clearly visible.

10. Conclusion.

This visit was very encouraging in many ways. The achievements of the staff in the Rehabilitation Centre supported by Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust reflect the spirit of the Armenian people of Karabakh. They have developed this as a Centre of Excellence, providing a visionary philosophy and policy of Rehabilitation which serves as a model for the whole of the South Caucasus.

The Armenians of Karabakh are committed to developing their land in ways which respect human dignity and fundamental freedoms. In spite of all the suffering and severe hardships inflicted by war and by subsequent attempts by Azerbaijan to impose a blockade and to intimidate inhabitants, visitors and investors, the people of Karabakh are making remarkable progress, politically, economically and in the development of civil society.

They deserve support – political and practical. There is a need for political advocacy, as many political leaders will still not visit to see the situation for themselves. For example, the British Ambassador is not allowed to visit Karabakh – nor any representative from the British Embassy. And, as already emphasised, there is a similar need for humanitarian assistance, as UN organizations, such as UNICEF and UNHCR will still not undertake humanitarian work in Karabakh.

But despite all the odds, the people of Karabakh are building a land where they are creating beauty from the ashes of destruction and where there is hope for those who in times past must have almost lost all hope.

However, their predicament is precarious. Azerbaijan is still adopting a policy of fiercely aggressive propaganda and threats of renewed military aggression. The international community needs to put pressure on Azerbaijan to stop its militaristic, aggressive approach and to co-operate with proposals to bring a peaceful settlement to the region – for the benefit of its own people as well as of the Armenians. Azerbaijan took total

control of Nakhichevan by forceful expulsion of Armenians and tried to adopt the same policy in Karabakh.

The Armenians were NOT the aggressors and their rights to live in peace and safety in their historic land must be recognised. After all they have suffered at the hands of Azerbaijan's aggressive attempts to carry out ethnic cleansing of their people from Karabakh, it is unreasonable to expect them ever again to accept Azeri sovereignty.

Policy proposals are 'on the table' to enable the needs of both the Azeris and the Armenians to be addressed: they include provisions for return of Azeris to many of their homes and the right of self-determination for the people of Karabakh.

It is my hope (based on the experience of 61 visits to the region, many during the war, and an official visit to Azerbaijan in the critical period of 1991, when its policy of ethnic cleansing was being cruelly implemented) that the international community will encourage a peace agreement in line with the proposals currently 'on the table', enabling all the people in the region to settle into a period of reconstruction, stability and prosperity.

Azerbaijan has massive economic resources, with its huge oil reserves; the Armenians have great resources of talent, creativity and enterprise. All could flourish: let us all help them to move forward to a solution which will enable them to do so,

Caroline Cox,

(The Baroness Cox)

August 2006.